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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RPO DUBAI 000293

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IR](#)

SUBJECT: IRAN: RAFSANJANI'S FRIDAY PRAYERS SERMON REIGNITES
OPPOSITION

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CLASSIFIED BY: Timothy Richardson, Acting Director, Iran
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REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: With his call on the government to "restore the people's trust" in the Islamic Republic's leadership after the disputed election, Rafsanjani used the Tehran Friday Prayers pulpit to defy both public expectations and the Supreme Leader's edict to accept Ahmadinejad's win. His unexpectedly bold sermon was matched by the return of hundreds of thousands of demonstrators to the streets of Tehran, and followed by a challenge from former President Khatami to the government to hold a national referendum on the legitimacy of the next Ahmadinejad government. Though their demands are unlikely to be addressed by the government in the near-term, the continued defiance of key leaders aligned with the opposition presents Supreme Leader Khamenei with a dilemma: allowing high-profile figures to continue stirring the pot will no doubt embolden critics of the government at both the popular and elite levels; yet taking the measures required to forcibly silence the top leadership of the opposition would very likely unleash another wave of popular dissent, while further exacerbating the fissures within the ruling establishment. Either way, a return to political stability in Iran appears to be a long way off. End summary.

Rafsanjani and Opposition Keep Election Dispute Alive

¶2. (C) Ayatollah Rafsanjani is a political survivor who usually avoids speaking directly and his public comments regarding the election before last week had been typically ambiguous. On Friday, however, Rafsanjani was uncharacteristically direct: he called for those detained since the election to be released from prison; said the media should not be "limited"; and most importantly, essentially alleged that the conduct and outcome of the election had sacrificed Iran's republican character.

¶3. (C) Voicing their own frustration with the downfall of Iranian republicanism, Iran's public returned to the streets in droves to hear Rafsanjani and protest yet again. Although the first few rows of the prayer grounds were filled by Ahmadinejad and Khamenei supporters, the crowd appeared to be dominated by Mousavi's backers. Estimates indicate that anywhere from thousands to a million people turned out, and the state-run Press TV reported hundreds of thousands were on hand for

Rafsanjani's address.

¶4. (C) Former President Khatami later praised Rafsanjani's sermon and called for a national referendum on the legitimacy of the government. He said only a referendum can resolve Iran's current crisis; if the majority supports Iran's government, they too will accept the outcome. (Note: Although unspecified, Khatami is probably referring to the legitimacy of the Ahmadinejad administration, not the legitimacy of the Islamic system.)

Opposition's Resilience Puts Khamenei in Dilemma

¶5. (C) Rafsanjani's Friday prayer sermon and Khatami's call for a referendum are unlikely to yield concrete concessions from Supreme Leader Khamenei or the Ahmadinejad government in the near term. Political prisoners arrested after the election, for example, are not likely to be released and a referendum also is highly unlikely. As yet, Khamenei has not indicated any willingness to compromise. Predictably, hardline clerics, such as Ahmadinejad's spiritual mentor Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, and the conservative press reacted harshly to Rafsanjani's speech. The newspaper Keyhan, whose editor is appointed by Khamenei, complained that Rafsanjani should have explained that the issue of the election is closed and that the protests should end.

¶6. (C) Comment: The significance of the weekend's events lies in the willingness of the opposition to keep challenging the legitimacy of the election. By keeping the issue alive, Rafsanjani and Khatami are implicitly defying the Supreme Leader, who has deemed the election valid. Their readiness to

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continue their challenge - and willingness of hundreds of thousands of demonstrators to risk the brutality of the security forces - places Khamenei in a difficult position. Allowing Rafsanjani, Khatami, and the rest of the opposition to continue agitating will no doubt embolden critics of the government at both the popular and elite levels. Yet forcibly silencing the top leadership figures of the opposition will undoubtedly unleash another wave of popular dissent, while further exacerbating the fissures within the ruling establishment. Either way, a return to political stability in Iran appears to be a long way off. End comment.
RICHARDSON